

Portland City Council approves the re-creation of City human-rights entity

By Ian Blazina
The Asian Reporter

Affirming the need for a platform for broad-based community exploration of critical human-relations issues faced by Portland's increasingly diverse population, Portland City Council recently approved the creation of an Office of Human Relations. The office will house the Human Rights Commission as well as related programs such as the Racial Profiling Commission and the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, another city program approved at the City Council meeting.

Since Portland's human-rights entity was disbanded in 2003, there has been a void where human-rights issues have been ignored or marginalized because no formal structure exists within the city bureaucracies to address such issues. The Human Rights Commission, which is planned to be up and running by July of this year, aims to fill this gap by providing education, research, advocacy, and intervention in human-rights conflicts, including hate/bias crimes, racial profiling, religious discrimination, gender disparity, and barriers to housing, employment, and civic engagement.

History of Portland's human-rights entity

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the most translated document in the world, in 1948. The same year, Portland's first human-rights entity was founded as the City of Portland Intergroup Relations Committee. This committee later became the Portland Human Relations Commission. In 1978 the commission partnered with Multnomah County to become the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. Budget restrictions eventually led to the deconstruction of the commission, which was relegated to a program within the Office of Neighborhood Involvement in 1998. In 2003, the program was cut from the city budget in its entirety.

Filling the void and fostering dialogue

According to Mayor Tom Potter, the commission "should have never gone away," and "the growing diversity of Portland ... demands it [be reinstated]." Potter noted that, in the absence of a human-rights entity, human-rights issues are only addressed by the city if the Mayor or one of the commissioners takes a personal interest in a particular issue.

Even when city leaders engage issues of human rights, the homogenously Caucasian City Council is not always capable of understanding and responding



HUMAN INTEREST. Affirming the need for a platform for broad-based community exploration of critical human-relations issues faced by Portland's increasingly diverse population, Portland City Council recently approved the creation of an Office of Human Relations. Pictured are community members (top photo) in attendance at January's City Council meeting held at Jefferson High School, and (bottom photo) Portland Mayor Tom Potter. (Photos courtesy of Center for Intercultural Organizing)

appropriately to the concerns of Portland's minority communities — a fact that was painfully evident in the way the city dealt with the renaming of Interstate Avenue. In the words of former head of Salem's human rights commission Jeannette Pai-Espinosa, the episode highlighted the bigotry and racism that is "deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of well-meaning Portlanders."

"We value community dialogue that leads to understanding," said Potter, offering his belief that the human-rights entity will create "a better city, a closer city, and an inclusive community."

While enforcement of human rights will be left up to the Bureau of Labor and Industries, the Human Rights Commission will act as a facilitator and mediator, and the centralized documentation of human-rights violations will make the experiences of individuals facing discrimination more than isolated anecdotes. Through active advocacy and research, the commission will be able to give voice to the marginalized groups most likely to be on the receiving end of prejudice.

By housing the Office of Human Relations at a yet-to-be-determined location in the community, the city hopes

Timmy Kwok Tso honored

At a recent celebration in honor of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the World Arts Foundation presented its annual tribute to the civil-rights leader.

The event included musical performances from diverse communities, as well as speeches from Governor Ted Kulongoski, Portland Mayor Tom Potter, and various civic and religious leaders, educators, school board members, and others.

The organization also presented a lifetime achievement award to community member Timmy Kwok Tso, for giving "the greater Portland metropolitan community a higher quality of life through exemplary service."

Tso has served as vice president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, president of the United Chinese Association of Oregon, a member

of the Committee on Fujian Sister State of Oregon, and commissioner of the Oregon Commission of Asian Affairs. He was honored for his work organizing Chinese groups in Portland in areas such as the arts, education, and business, among other achievements.

"In essence, it has been my interest to gather the local community groups promoting the mutual friendship, an active exchange of culture, and encouraging business potentials between the U.S. and China," Tso said in a statement. "My latest effort is to increase community awareness by publishing the *China Media*, a newspaper written in the Chinese language designed for the direct and immediate servicing and strengthening of the many aspects of our Portland Chinese community."

Relations is planned to be open by July.

Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs

At the same City Council meeting, the commissioners approved all four recommendations of the Immigrant and Refugee Task Force, an exploratory committee instigated by the council to include immigrants and refugees in civic and public life. The task force was made up of 15 community leaders born in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and Europe, as well as representatives from the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, Bureau of Parks and Recreation, Bureau of Housing and Community Development, Portland Development Commission, and the Portland Police Bureau.

The Task Force recommended creating a multi-ethnic Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, establishing a multicultural community center, providing additional resources for existing immigrant and refugee community organizations to train and support their constituents in civic engagement, and conducting a professional evaluation to assess the city's current human resources policies and practices and make recommendations that would result in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of multicultural staff.

For more information, or to download a copy of the findings and recommendations of the consultants hired to look into re-creating Portland's human-rights entity, visit <www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=eeija>.

To download a copy of the recommendations of the Immigrant and Refugee Task Force, visit <www.portlandonline.com/shared/cfm/image.cfm?id=180720>.



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